

How individuals become individuals? An interview with Danilo Martuccelli

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Abstract

The aim of this interview is to offer elements for the debate about the current epistemological challenges in sociology. It represents a rare opportunity of giving voice to a researcher who, although dedicating himself to European themes and specifically to the French reality, is also involved with the reality in Latin American. The interview given by Danilo Martuccelli in October 2012 was conducted by Maria da Graça Jacintho Setton and Marília Pontes Sposito, two professors in the sociology of education from the School of Education of Universidade de São Paulo, and relied on an informal and friendly debate carried out partly via e-mail, partly in person. Danilo Martuccelli is professor of sociology at the Faculty of Human and Social Sciences of Université Paris Descartes (Sorbonne). Here is also a member of the *CERLIS research group (Centre de recherches sur les liens sociaux)* of the same University. In this interview we have the exposition of a theoretical and analytical framework that reveals the integration of the micro- and macro-sociological perspectives. Drawing from a solid reading of the sociology classics, and based on a group and individual approach, Danilo Martuccelli offers an inspiring description of how we can incorporate this vast theoretical tradition. Making use of these reflections, his testimony brings to light the contemporary debate within the social sciences, and also affords the expansion and historical and theoretical contextualization of the formation processes of the social.

Keywords

Sociology – Social structure – Singularization – Individuation – Contemporary societal formations.

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Como os indivíduos se tornam indivíduos? Entrevista com Danilo Martuccelli

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Resumo

O objetivo desta entrevista é oferecer subsídios para o debate acerca dos desafios epistemológicos atuais da sociologia. Trata-se de uma rara oportunidade de dar voz a um pesquisador que mesmo se ocupando de temas europeus e específicos da realidade francesa, não deixa de ter um envolvimento com a realidade latino-americana. A entrevista concedida por Danilo Martuccelli, em outubro de 2012, foi realizada pelas professoras de sociologia da educação da Faculdade de Educação da Universidade de São Paulo, Maria da Graça Jacintho Setton e Marília Pontes Sposito, a partir de um debate informal e cordial realizado ora por e-mail, ora presencialmente. Danilo Martuccelli é professor de sociologia da Faculdade de Ciências Humanas e Sociais da Universidade Paris-Descartes (Sorbonne). É também membro do grupo de pesquisa CERLIS (Centre de recherches sur les liens sociaux), que pertence à mesma instituição. Nesta entrevista temos a exposição de um instrumental teórico e analítico que evidencia a integração das perspectivas micro e macrosociológica. Aproveitando-se de uma sólida leitura dos clássicos da sociologia a partir de um enfoque grupal ou individual, Danilo Martuccelli oferece um relato inspirador de como podemos nos apropriar de uma larga tradição teórica. Fazendo uso dessas reflexões, o depoimento põe em tela um debate contemporâneo no interior das ciências sociais, bem como garante a ampliação e a contextualização histórica e teórica dos processos de formação do social.

Palavras-chave

Sociologia – Estrutura social – Singularização – Individuação – Formações societárias contemporâneas.

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Introduction



Danilo Martuccelli is professor of sociology at the Faculty of Human and Social Sciences of Université Paris Descartes (Sorbonne). With a remarkable production – around ten books as the single author and another ten in co-authorship, in addition to articles in international journals –, Martuccelli was born in 1964 in Peru, did his undergraduate studies in Argentina in the area of philosophy, and lives in France since his doctorate in sociology in the 1980s.

Tireless and sensitive to the current challenges faced by sociology, he has dedicated himself for some time now to an analytical inflection towards a sociology of singularization. However, the epistemological centrality of the individual in his sociological analyses does not lead him to abandon the chief concern of this discipline. On the contrary, Martuccelli seems to believe that it is in a dialogue between historical-social structures and individual experiences that we can open a novel interpretive road.

Seriousness and enthusiasm for the intellectual work are important features in his work. An adept of a handcrafted sociology, with a production that renews itself at each publication, and with a continual exchange with his peers, the reading of his works offers inspiration to various forms of doing sociology.

The 1999 book *Sociologies de la modernité* marks an important turn in his works, synthesizing a solid incursion into the main authors of sociological thinking and, from

such dialogue, facing the challenges posed to the 20th and 21st centuries' sociology. In that work, Martuccelli presents a perceptive reflection and already outlines the main features that will mark the more recent paths in his field of investigation and interest. Which means that, since that point he seems to have as his concern to unveil the difficulties faced by contemporary sociology in accounting for the social experiences of the individuals. Broadly speaking, we could say that the reflections he offers in that book deal with three theoretical traditions or matrices that accompany him to this day. These would be, in the first place, the theories that discuss *social differentiation*; next, the theories that deal with *processes of rationalization*; and, lastly, the theories that are dedicated to the modern condition. The author is, however, aware of the fact that such traditions are not mutually exclusive, but rather that at times they dialogue with each other, and ultimately they all offer valuable analytical tools.

It is also possible to say that the incursion mentioned above nurtured his later investigations. Martuccelli's work is characterized by a wide articulation of readings, as attested by the variety of themes that fall under his interest, all of them inspired by a higher concern: the unbalance between sociological interpretation and individual experiences. In his several books, Martuccelli highlights the limits of a traditional sociology that seeks to apprehend the individual on the basis of some specific representation of the social world. For him, a traditional reading would tend to conceive the signification and trajectory of the actions of individuals from their position and function within a constituted social domain. According to this perspective, the individuals' conducts would be formed and deformed by the agency of invisible structures that would constitute the individual actions; subjects, in their turn, are perceived as the immediate products of the interweaving of forces socially originated (MARTUCCELLI, 2002, 2007, 2010b).

Even if such reading is popular nowadays, Martuccelli (2007, 2010b) says that the current situation urges us to rethink such framework, both in the European continent and in Latin America. In reality, the crisis of the idea of an agent or social actor and the strict correspondence between social trajectory, collective process and personal experience would be demanding from the sociology that it establishes new paths. For Martuccelli, the question of the social can no longer be apprehended exclusively based on social positions, from a system of social relations or from a certain conception of social order. The novelty of the current situation, according to him, comes from the fact that henceforth the distance between what is experienced by the actors and the language of the analysts does not cease to grow. In this sense, social classes are no longer the remarkable principle of political, intellectual and practical unity of social life. Such studies about individual trajectories and experiences have turned hesitant. The boundaries between social groups, without quite disappearing, turn trajectories into fluid experiences. On top of all that, according to Martuccelli (2002), there no longer exist closed universes for the individuals, and even thinking about the meanings of actions and their determinations exclusively from the position occupied by a social actor within a well-defined context becomes difficult.

Martuccelli then embarks on empirical investigations to put his working thesis under test. His books *Forgé par l'épreuve* (2006) and *La société singulariste* (2010a), among others, reveal to the reader an effort to handle concepts and a method of observation and analysis with the purpose of building an analytical set of tools. Based on a diagnostic of our time – the singularist society –, his search consists in putting into practice a different interpretive sensibility through a new sociological set of tools (MARTUCCELLI, 2010a). Forsaking universal theoretical formulae, he invites is to think about the specific spatial and

temporal reality of each locality according to particular historical experiences, helping us to understand the mechanisms responsible for the production of individuals under various contexts (MARTUCCELLI, 2010b). In a kind of historical sociology, he insists that we observe the societal dynamics, that is to say, the simultaneous processes of socialization and individuation as fundamentally historical. For him, the individual is never – as mistakenly stated by some – at the origin of society, but is rather the result of a specific mode of making society (MARTUCCELLI, 2010a).

However, Martuccelli affirms that the challenge will always be to establish the link between personal experiences and collective interplay. His proposal is, therefore, that the study of the individual should today be a material of the reflection for sociology. According to him, if individuation is produced at the intersection of a synchrony and a diachrony, it is then necessary to apprehend at a biographical level the factors that amalgamate a social and historical situation. The notion of *épreuve* – in a literal translation, challenge or difficulty – constitutes an analytical operator, since it allows us to reconnect structural processes, spaces and personal itineraries (MARTUCCELLI, 2006). In other words, Martuccelli (2006, 2010a) presents an original theoretical contribution, allowing a new analytical turn.

Lastly, it would also be interesting to highlight the fact that, although most of his studies deal with the European society, and specifically with the French society, his reflections are extended to the societal Latin American universe. And although his themes may be qualified as universal – for example, individuation processes and the structural challenges of schooling or work –, the analytical tools he offers are capable of being instantiated within various social contexts.

Three of his publications give testimony along these lines. The first, *Cambio de rumbo: la sociedad a escala del individuo* (2007) and the second *Existen individuos en el Sur?* (2010b),

both published in Chile by *Editora LOM*, present a diagnostic of the modern condition and a rather original interpretation of Latin American reality. The third, released in 2012 also by LOM, this time in co-authorship with Kathya Araujo, and entitled *Desafios comunes: retrato de la sociedad chilena y sus individuos* (tomes I and II), is the result of a large investigation carried out in Chile to discuss the individuation processes and, thus, to illuminate with empirical analyses the interpretations and worries present in the two other books. Martuccelli has developed important works with researchers from the South and, since

the 1990s, has also maintained a fruitful dialogue with the research conducted in Brazil within the social sciences and education. His studies developed in partnership with François Dubet about the school have been important references for Brazilian researchers within the sociology of education since the 1990s. The several articles published in Brazil and in Latin American journals examine central issues that characterize the dilemmas of contemporary school – authority, citizenship, identities, and socialization, amongst others –, always offering a creative, solid and original contribution to the debate.

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Academic trajectory and sociological work

Danilo Martuccelli, thank you very much for giving us this interview. Your work is highly regarded in Brazil and this will be a true opportunity to strengthen your dialogue with the Brazilian university public.

You are still fairly young but you already have a considerable body of work. Can you say something about your academic trajectory, about your education in philosophy in Argentina (U.N.C. Argentina -1985) and your specialization in sociology in France? (Doctorat from l'E.H.E.S.S. in 1991 and HDR, Université de Lille 3, 2004)

Thank you for the “fairly young”. No one had ever told me this before. It shows that it’s probably not quite right. Now, jokes apart, I’ll tell you briefly about my academic trajectory. In the early 1980s, for a young Peruvian who was interested in literature and politics, philosophy could seem, no doubt a bit naively, as a discipline that could be a bridge between my intellectual interests. Obviously, that was not the case, but despite that I think in retrospect that it was a good decision. As it was also, in the end, the idea of studying philosophy in Cordoba, Argentina. What for some people that could seem like a crazy decision turned out to be one of the biggest choices of my life. My studies in Argentina coincided with the Malvinas war, with the end of the military dictatorship, with the opening of the process of democratic transition, with the first electoral defeat of Peronism, with Alfonsín’s mandate as president, with the Commissions for the Truth, and with the various disillusionments that all these processes quickly generated. It all happened very fast and very intensely. The experience impacted me so much that many years later, when I was already living in France, I conducted with Maristella Svampa a large empirical investigation about Peronism and

its transformations, which resulted in *La plaza vacía*, published in 1997.

But let me go back to my years of formation. In that political context, the important thing was not so much what I learned in the *Facultad de Filosofía y Humanidades*, but the support from friends, the social and intellectual encouragement that I found in Argentina. What did really interest me in the studies of philosophy? As a matter of fact, little or nothing, and that largely because of the distance from the teachers I had. But this experience gave me some taste, some interest and curiosity for the ideas, and for self-formation, which I have not lost with the years.

At any rate, my interests centered above all on political philosophy, and when I finished the licentiate, and with a wider knowledge of what the social sciences were, and of what philosophy was not, it became clear to me that I should continue my master and Ph.D. studies in sociology. The decision of doing them in France was due, apart from reasons of intellectual interest for the work of certain French authors, to a series of biographical reasons.

Which authors and schools of thought influenced your academic formation? Are there any Latin American authors there were important in your formation?

In my years as a student of philosophy, but that is part of the automatic picture of the generation to which I belong, the reading of Marx was evident, and within the context of the democratic opening in Argentina one had to add here the Frankfurt School and above all Jean-Paul Sartre. In fact, to be fair, my intellectual horizon during those years was the Western Marxism and, within that, more the *young humanist* Marx than the later scientific Marx of the structuralism. My intellectual and professional horizons have changed, but deep down the heart of my reflection continues to be the same. A continuity that was helped by the fact that I was never what was then called

a Marxist, and even less a political militant. My interest for Marxism was intellectual and not a militant faith. At the time it always interested me to read the critics of Marxism, to the point that I believe it is fair to say that in those years I was a kind of liberal Marxist.

But these personal interests were radically divorced from what was being studied at the University. The intellectual atmosphere of the philosophy Department was very traditional – progressive teachers were at most Neo-Thomists – and in this context of intellectual asphyxiation, Kant – which you could read! – was an important author in my formation.

In those years, philosophy was going, at an international level, through the shift from continental European philosophy, and the importance of history in philosophical reflection, towards the hegemony of Anglo-Saxon philosophy – the last great expressions of logical positivism and above all the triumph, so visible today, of pragmatism. Of all that the institution in Cordoba did not feel much echo, but there was true student effervescence. Some friends, for example, organized a study group around the philosophy of sciences, in which many of those works were read and discussed. However, my concerns were always oriented towards politics and the society.

My shift toward sociology happened through the seminars of a particular group of intellectuals at the EHESS. Alain Touraine, who was my thesis supervisor, but also Lefort, Castoriadis, Pécaut, or more specific seminars I attended by Gauchet or Rosanvallon. I believe that in many of these the Marxist tradition, including the presence of Sartre, can be seen, even in polemic terms. In fact, I was only educated as a sociologist after my doctoral thesis (in sociology), already a researcher at the CNRS, and specially in Bordeaux in the company of François Dubet, with whom I concluded my apprenticeship as a sociologist with an investigation on the school experience (*A l'école*, 1996), and where I really discovered the sociological tradition. In this process, the

encounter with the work of Talcott Parsons and of Erving Goffman was very important. I believe that *Sociologies de la modernité* (1999) and the thesis defended in the book about the dialectics between the idea of society and the experience of modernity synthesize those trajectory of readings.

And what about Latin America? It was always very much present in my formation and in my work, in part through my literary readings, but also and above all in the sincere admiration I have, and which I keep, for the best of its essayistic tradition. In the case of Latin America I believe that its essayistic tradition is even more original and of higher quality than its literary tradition. A few years ago I wrote with Anne Barrère a book about contemporary French novel (*Le roman comme laboratoire*, 2009), but I don't believe that I would dedicate a similar work to Latin American novel. On the other hand, as showed by my works on Latin America, the body of knowledge present in its essayistic tradition is an important part of my formation and of my readings since my adolescence in Lima.

How do you assess your situation as a sociologist of Latin American origin working in France? Have you produced important collaborative works? Do you consider the French environment as stimulating of this kind of incursion? Does it stimulate the development of research groups? What are your contacts, acquaintances and interests in Latin America nowadays?

The most interesting thing about this question is, I believe, that it goes back once again to the experience of a generation. I belong to one of the first generations of researchers from the South who, professionally rooted in the North, work with social themes of the northern countries. Up to this day, and still including the majority of the cases, investigators from the South work only with themes of their own national societies. My doctoral dissertation,

which was interested in collective actions in Europe, used to arise profound surprise among the other Latin American students in Paris, who worked on their own national societies. I believe that the most interesting thing that “my” Latin American experience gives me in the analysis of social life is a result of this decentralization. Differently from many Latin Americans who believe that modernity is embodied in the societies of the North and that keep reading Latin America, perhaps with certain ingenuousness, based on its anomalies, my experience of almost 25 years of fieldwork in France (and occasionally in Italy and England) has given me a radically distinct view.

Apart from that, my form of intellectual work is very handcrafted. One of the great possibilities of doing sociology in France is that, at the moment and until this moment, this kind of exercise is institutionally possible. What I mean is that, except in my period as a doctoral student, in a team coordinated by Michael Wieviorka, I have never taken part in a big project of collective, international investigation with large funds. The essential part of my works (either of social theory or empirical studies) has taken place without funding, in a solitary way or with the sole company of one adventure companion (who could sometimes have some particular financial support). In all my empirical studies (about racism, urban policies, school experience, the populism in Argentina, the individuation in France or in Chile, and even in the development of the extrospective method) I have always done the essential, and even the totality, of the fieldwork. In the same way, with respect to the writing of my books on social theory I have always treated it as a solitary work (I have never had a research assistant in any of my projects).

I tell you this with the greatest possible neutrality. I know that excellent studies can be developed in collective teams; I know that having assistants makes things easier and speed them up; I know that working with funds is easier than doing it without money;

and I also know that fine field studies can be written delegating the empirical work to assistants. It is just not the way I work. In fact, I cannot see how I could base myself on the reading notes of an assistant to comment on a book. And for me sociological investigation is constructed during the fieldwork. I need to see the people I am writing about; my intuitions are created and corrected in the comings and goings of the empirical work, and personally I do not see how I could delegate this work or deprive me from this information. That allows me to have an experience of fieldwork much more important and varied than that of most of my fellow sociologists. But I do not turn this experience, as many of them do, into a principle of intellectual legitimacy, and I recognize, unlike many others, the legitimacy of a sociological discourses based on the interpretation of secondary literature (and also the possible intellectual interest of essays about social life).

In this trajectory, the intellectual adventures shared with several colleagues have been decisive. Singularity is only possible based on the common. In each one of these works, the intellectual conversation, close and often, with this peculiar frequency and involvement that only a joint investigation can convey, has always brought me substantial things – and I hope I have also brought them to those who accompanied me in those studies. In each experience, my own reflection was nurtured by others’ obsessions; I discovered worlds that I ignored, I understood – from the inside, that is, in the company of others – the strength of certain questions and the substance of so many other traditions.

In the last years I conducted two joint works in Latin America. The first with Bernardo Sorj – *El desafío latinoamericano* (2008) – is a report on the dynamics of social cohesion and democracy in the region. The second, with Kathya Araujo – *Desafíos comunes. Retrato de la sociedad chilena y sus individuos* (2012) –, is a result of an empirical investigation of many years about the individuation process in Chile.

Your academic career began within the context of the theory of collective action, with your doctoral studies on the conflictive *action*. How do you see this work nowadays?

My doctoral dissertation, which I never published, presented in 1991, was an attempt to analyze from the viewpoint of the contemporary social struggles the possible current validity of the modern project of making history. The notion of conflictive *action*, investigated and constructed essentially through two case studies (ecologism and feminism), functioned as the axis of this effort, forcing me to develop critical demarcations from other versions of the project of making history constructed from labor and from communication. The conclusion of the thesis was that differently from what the historicist tradition of the collective subject supposed, the social struggles can only be social references of partial meaning. And that because in each period it is only certain systems of social relations that are object of criticism and conflictive contestation, whereas many other social relations are not conflictualized. The autonomous and conflictive intelligence of society can only be partial.

Personally, my doctoral thesis meant a triple distance-taking from the tradition of Western Marxism: (1) radical adhesion to the contingency of modernity against all philosophy, however secularized History may be; (2) leaving behind the hermeneutics of labor – that is, the idea that emancipation relies necessarily on an unveiling of the hidden and mystified conditions of production; (3) irretrievable rupture with the imaginary of the revolution and with the idea of the existence of a breaking point, of radical transformation of the system. When I finished my doctoral thesis, I was (and still am) convinced of the definitive character of these impasses, and therefore I felt the need, since I was at the same time carrying on studies on racism, on the school experience and on populism, of delving in an exigent, many years long, reading of the sociological

tradition. This intellectual fase concluded at a personal level with the publication almost ten years later of *Sociologies de la modernité* (1999) and *Grammaires de l'individu* (2002).

How would you explain the transition of your interests, from a sociology aimed at the collective agents towards a sociology of the individual? What is the weight of your philosophical formation in the definition of your old and new interests of investigation?

Becoming aware of the impasses of the imagery of revolution and, beyond that, of the dilemma of conflictive *action* as the main road to produce an emancipative unveiling of the social relations was an unexpected result of my thesis. But since then this is a conclusion I have agreed with. Such a position explains my distance from the essence of what has been called critical thinking during the last decades: in all of it what predominates is the idea of emancipation as *breach*; a critique that, one way or another, is always organized around the opening, around fluxes, *events*, around *creation*, in short, around *movement* more than the institution. This shift is quite evident in the French case in the wake of the post-68 thought, be it in Deleuze, Badiou, Derrida or Rancière, but it is also clear in other places, as shown by the shifts in the queer movement, in radical democracy and in the rainbow strategies, in the thesis of the Multitude, and the imaginary of the alter-globalization. It is not necessary to keep giving examples, I'm sure you understand what I mean. My distance from those works is radical, I mean, it stems from the very root of the question. In my eyes, collective action, and particularly the imaginary of revolution, is no longer the privileged route of critical work or of political emancipation. If I have to put it into philosophical terms: the collective subject no longer seems to me to be the key to the intelligence of society.

I believe that this background explains the disappointing character of the sociology of

collective mobilizations in the last twenty years. The achievements that undoubtedly occurred in the description and in the effective analysis of social struggle (in terms of the mobilization of resources, repertoires, opportunities, means of communication, symbolic frameworks) have coincided with the awareness of the limits of the wide discourse of emancipation through collective action. I mean that, in this context, the collective agents are disenchanted, they become a sociological object like any other, and one finds out progressively that their ability to serve as tools for the understanding of society, and above all of the effective and ordinary experiences of the individuals, is in the end, contrary to what was assumed for a long time, very partial and biased. It is in this sense that the individual, and above all the process of individuation, seem to me the best option to continue, through other means, the critical work.

The horizon is the same; the tool is distinct. The transition is therefore less of interests of investigation than of the analytical tools: the passage from subjectivation, and from the emancipating role given to the collective subject, towards individuation and the capacity, much larger in my eyes, that has to be given to the individuals in the understanding of social phenomena. In personal terms, the articulation between these two moments is marked by the publication in 2001 of *Dominations ordinaires*. The thesis is simple: knowing who dominates and how (the upper class), and who is collectively mobilized against domination (social struggle), does not account, except very partially, for the effective sphere of experiences of domination that individuals have. Only a tiny fraction of experiences of domination are transformed in social struggle. Beneath the tip of this iceberg there is the essential of social life. But, while in the context of my doctoral thesis I thought that we should keep privileging the conflictive *action* as a tool to the critical unveiling of society, this hypothesis (which is still predominant in the so-called critical thinking) seems to me from now on insufficient.

Thinking about your academic production, would it be possible to point out important moments, ruptures, unfolding or transitions? Could you mention some of your works in these contexts?

The biographical continuity is perhaps an illusion, but I still believe that in the journey I have just briefly described what predominates is a “humanist” affiliation and interest. This concern initially took a literary form, quickly found expression in the context of Western Marxism and of the debates about the *young Marx*, in existentialism, of course, and later, and perhaps already in a more personal form, in the context of the sociology of individuation. However, within this continuity of interests I believe that intellectually the most important turning point happens with the publication of *La consistance du social* (2005). This book condenses theoretically the 15 years of intellectual search that began after my doctoral thesis, marked by fieldworks and studies in social theory, and it does that by putting at the heart of sociology the challenge to understand a particular ontological universe.

You have a remarkable capacity to articulate themes and authors, however, your concerns seem to drive you to the specificity of the modern condition and to the processes of individuation. Among the classics are you closer to Georg Simmel and Norbert Elias than to Émile Durkheim and Max Weber?

Social theories are working tools. The problem of sociology – Wright Mills has given forever the best possible characterization – is to manage to articulate collective dimensions and personal experiences. The classics that you mention, all of them, are undoubtedly committed to this preoccupation. But ultimately this is not a feature exclusive to the classics. All good sociology, over and above immaterial queries about the methods or the macro and micro levels, attempts to achieve this particular form

of intelligence that allows understanding the dialectics between individual life and the types of society. Each one of them, progressively and for different reasons (that include biographical elements, intellectual traditions, historical moments), privileges sometimes one theme or domain of study, but privileges above all and in general an analytical operator (social classes, the rationalization process, social movements, the interactions, the *habitus*). Good sociology is not more macro than micro; it can go very far in both directions; it can go *up* or *down* without any difficulty, since what it manages is precisely to account, from a particular perspective, for the articulation between history and biography. I believe that that is the common legacy of all sociological tradition – a particular view of the social world. And in this sense I regret that the classics are many times used as a legitimizing principle of intellectual strategies, or even worse, that they have become the academic monopoly of those who limit themselves to making small comments about big authors. For me their function is a different one: they represent the safeguard against the Balkanization of themes and against the chapel wars; a common heritage. Social theory is nothing but the construction of analytical tools to face the big social and historical challenges of a period. The objective of sociology is to interpret the world based on the social relations. And the classics you mentioned, or others, and more than the classics, the good sociology, aims at keep this tradition. In this sense, all sociologists, even if the recipes for the cocktail are different, are Weberians and Marxists, Durkheimians and Simmelians.

How do you evaluate the epistemological gains and the challenges of the analytical turn towards a sociology of individuation? What is the specificity of this analytical approach? How can we make clear the differences from a psychological or phenomenological study?

Classical sociology has always been interested in individual experiences. However,

it has never made of them, except partially in the case of Simmel, the center of interpretation. It didn't do it because the intelligence of society was pre-organized in the social and political debates around the notion of social class. The concept acquires distinct meanings according to the sociological conditions, but at its origin it is a term from the political life that describes ordinary social experiences. Social class was, thanks to the social struggles carried out in its name and to the expansion of the public state apparatus, a shared horizon of meaning: the agents understood their lives from such horizon.

The current situation is different. The individuals, due to a series of structural transformations, tend more and more to perceive social life based on their own personal experiences. And it is from them, and through them, that they attempt to understand collective phenomena: a transformation that, as I try to show through an empirical investigation in *Forgé par l'épreuve* (2006), requires a change of direction both in the way of conceiving sociology and in the recipient of sociological work. From now on, it is necessary that sociology translates to the level of individual experiences the major collective challenges of a society. Previously, this work was carried out largely through the notion of social class; today I believe that this same preoccupation must be dealt with by focusing on the structural process of the production of individuals.

The individuation, the question about the kind of individual that is structurally produced in a society, has therefore many great features: (1) in the first place, it is a particular form of macrosociology whose vocation is no longer that of describing how society as a whole *functions* (differentiation, systems, etc.), but rather one that is interested in illuminating the structural phenomena at the level of individuals; (2) for that, individuation insists in the common character of the challenges that in every society individuals must face – certainly, each individual will

give them, depending on their resources, identities and positions, a singular response, but all of them, given the force of the process of rationalization and mobilization of modern societies, are destined to face the same challenges; (3) individuation therefore describes a process that varies substantially between societies, but also between historic periods, giving to works of comparative historical sociology a new character; (4) individuation in its strictly political vocation tries to produce an intelligence from and through the personal experiences of the major challenges common to a society, participating therefore in the critical understanding of these challenges and, in this way, taking part in the democratic debate.

Thus, in the study of individuation there are two moments. On the one hand, we have to account for the major factors or the main structural trials that give life to a historical mode of individuation – one that brings forth a particular cartography of a society. On the other hand, it allows studying the work that, faced with those trials, creates each individual agent based on a personalized social ecology. The dialectics between what is common in what is singular is therefore at the basis of individuation. However, in this equation, and within the context of the sociological tradition, what we are dealing with here is ultimately accounting for individual experiences based on the intelligence of the structures. Along this line of study, undoubtedly, psychological or phenomenological reflections cross, but that doesn't make the problem less distinctive: what calls attention essentially is not the intrapsychic development or the plurality of the phenomonic forms of consciousness, but the understanding of the ways in which individuals deal with large structural challenges. Structural challenges are the central objective of knowledge; the intelligence of the individual depends on the intelligence of society. Through the way of introspection, individuation opens an extrospective form of knowledge – the understanding of oneself depends on the intelligence of society.

What is the difference between a sociology of the individual and a sociology of individuation? In your books you state that, paradoxically, the studies that are based on the processes of individuation do not take as their point of departure or arrival the analysis of the individual. Could you explore this idea a bit further?

The sociology of the individual is the term with which I believe we can describe a particular intellectual movement, observed in sociology for many decades now. In any case, this is a term we have elected along with François de Singly to present this approach, and specially the perspectives produced, mainly in France, under this context in a joint book published in 2009 (*Les sociologies de l'individu*). Within the sociologies of the individual, different strategies can be discerned depending on their choice to emphasize studies based on observable transformations at the level of institutions, on the socialization process, on the social bond, on identities or, as I have done in my own works, on the process of individuation.

In the case of individuation, the structural processes of the production of individuals are the central object of studies – which allows us to turn it precisely into the axis of a macrosociological study. Whereas in the context of classical sociology the interest lay almost exclusively on the large structural factors of individuation (the mode of production, the social differentiation, the rationalization), in the context of the new social sensibility organized around the individual one has to devise analytical operators capable of translating the structural challenges to the scale of the individual. That is what I intend to do with the notion of trial or challenge, and that is what explains the meaning of the sentence that you evoke: at the start of the study about individuation we find the individuals (that is, the agents and the manner in which they describe and live their experiences) and at the end of the process we also find the agents

(but this time through the ways in which they deal with a standardized set of large structural trials). Between these two stages the essential of the investigation device is to discriminate inductively these specific structural trials as a historical mode of individuation. In other words, at the beginning we start from the descriptions and experiences of the individuals interviewed; at the end of the investigation we arrive at a standardized set of common trials. What we pursue is therefore to move from the heterogeneous experience of life towards a historic mode of individuation.

Would your notion of the consistency of the social be an analytical operator similar to the notion of configuration in Norbert Elias?

Only in part and with an important difference. Differently from other works of social ontology that generally privilege the representations or the production (constructivism), in my trajectory it interests me to ask about the ontological characteristics of social life based on action. From this perspective, the consistency of the social defines what seems to me to be the major ontological characteristic of social life – namely, that in social life it is always possible to act in a different way. Nonetheless, this irreducible possibility of action should not be understood essentially as an attribute of the agent (*freedom, creation*), but as a constitutive structural possibility of social life – which distinguishes, by the way, the social level of reality from the physical-chemical, biological or psychological levels. To account for this irreducible dimension of social action we employ the metaphors of resistant malleability or of elasticity: we act upon a reality that resists us (the various restrictions that condition our conducts), and at the same time we suppose, at least in imagination, that ultimately there is an insurmountable limit (to express it metaphorically, the moment of shock against reality). That is to say, social action is developed avoiding effective obstacles on the

one hand, and postulating the existence of an imaginary limit on the other.

Given this ontological characteristic of social life, the specific work of every historical society consists in reducing and channeling the elasticity of the action (largely thanks to the institutions). I believe that it is at this level that we employ Norbert Elias's notion of configuration and the indissoluble social relation thus described between society and individual. I believe that the difference between these two notions is visible at the level of the metaphors: to Elias, the idea of configuration alludes to chess pieces (each piece is determined by the positioning of the other pieces) or to the nodes of a net (if we take them from the net, all nodes move in the same direction). Consistency, in its first description, underlines a different experience: the fact that it is always possible to act in a different way. At the heart of the difference, I believe, is the fact that the notion of consistency recognizes in a different way from Elias's, and with more radical consequences, the contingency (the no-necessity) of social life.

This distinction is clearly reflected in the works of analysis that both notions produce. In the case of Elias, the notion – even if the concept is not still theorized – is constructed within the context of his study of the courtesan society, particularly Versailles, which was his first major study in 1933. In this work, the notion of configuration is a truly heuristic tool that describes a strict and highly programmed and interwoven set of conducts. When Elias makes use of this concept for other kinds of social relations I believe that its heuristic value is less evident, and it may even be debatable, as when he analyses with this concept, towards the end of his life, the international relations. The difference is in the effective nature of the obstacles to action: active and strong in the courtesan society (that in this sense can metaphorically work as a *magnetic field*), its veracity and strength are much more unsteady when it comes to other types of social networks (precisely what the notion of

configuration does not allow us to analyze). It is this intrinsic and permanent openness of social life that is underlined in the case of the social consistencies; as a result, even in highly structured organizational universes (companies, schools, families) the analysis of the consistencies emphasized the margins and the initiatives of the agents faced with the obstacles.

Along this same line of reasoning, have we seen an approximation between the notion of *l'épreuve* and Elias's notions of coercion/control of the emotions?

This question allows me to continue my previous answer. Because Norbert Elias formulates his historical vision of Western modernity around the hypothesis of a powerful civilization process theorized within the context of rationalization (at the level of the control of pulsions and of violence), which in his works underlined with so much strength the centrality of the process of self-control of emotions. Once again, we must not lose sight of the fact that his studies are inscribed in the double heritage of the intuitions of Freud and Weber. At the core of Elias's work we find the vision of a demand more and more imperative of self-control on the individuals as the historical process develops and, progressively, the growing recognition of the manifestations of de-civilization that it produces.

If I had to put it in my own words, and I believe that without doing any violence to Elias, his work is an example of a sociology of individuation constructed around the large structural factors (the rules of courtesy and etiquette, the monopoly of legitimate violence by the States) which, globally, is little sensitive to the variations of individual experiences within this process, and that, above all, is little sensitive to the effective work that the distinct individuals exercise faced with those prescriptions. Of course, Elias supposes (many times presupposes, actually) the emotions, positive and negative, that

afflict individuals faced with the civilization process, but he pays little attention, in the end, to the effective and differentiated work of the individuals. Even the unfinished study about Mozart presents this feature: Mozart's dilemma, despite the wealth of biographical elements evoked, is reduced to the tension generated, on the one hand, by the desire of the free artist-genius that lives off his art, and on the other, by the reality of a musician's dependence on the court.

The notion of trial is inscribed in a different historical diagnostic. The key is found less in a rationalization than in what I present in *La société singulariste* (2010) as the process of singularization. A process observable at the level of the industrial production, of institutions, of sociabilities, of identities and, after it and structurally produced by it, the affirmation of a social sensibility that confers to personal experiences a new function in the social and political composition of contemporary societies. A sensibility that give, therefore, a bigger and more distinctive importance to the individuals, and that invites sociology to account, on a new basis, for the link between structures and agents. That is what the notion of trial points towards (and, in this sense, the analogous notion in Elias's system seems to me to be that of configuration). Trials are structural challenges that change historically. Their vocation is that of describing the distinct forms that these challenges assume in contemporary differentiated societies, which implies that trials present different faces according to the social contexts, and that they cannot be, as Elias presupposed, all similar (the trial at work differs from the trial in the relationship with others, for example). Furthermore, faced with these structural trials, a large diversity of possible responses at the level of the social actors can be observed. Trials are challenges, not determinisms –which entails a particular and distinctive attention to the work of the individuals. It is through common trials that singular individuals are produced.

What are your next projects or plans for research? Who are your current interlocutors?

For the next years I hope I can carry out research in three different directions. Firstly, and that's the project I'm currently working with, I intend to explore the consequences of some of the ideas expressed in *La consistance du social* from the perspective of a historical sociology, asking myself about the ways in which in different periods the limits with reality were built. Reality is that which resists, but in order to analyze this resistance we have to understand it in the context of the dialectic between coercions and the imaginary limit, trying to understand under what concrete modalities the determining function of reality has been exercised by religion (and the invisible entities), then by politics (and the natural hierarchy), later and already in modernity, by economy (and the indisputable character of its factual mechanics), and how this function is being progressively bestowed upon ecology (and upon the imaginary of the ecological thresholds and catastrophes).

Secondly, I hope to be able to conduct an empirical investigation (individual interviews and sessions of group discussion) about the significances and political challenges that the current process of singularization brings. The central point here will be to understand under what modalities the crisis of the notion of common world can be compensated by the notion of *common life* – a notion that translates in political terms the challenges of current individuation and the particular mode through which the trials describe this process. Simply put: to rethink the political through the articulation between the common and the singular.

And in third place, and in continuation to an essay of historical sociology about individuals in Latin America – *¿Existen individuos en el Sur?* (2010) –, I would like to explore the manner in which the individuation processes can be converted into the gate to a comparative historical sociology of a new

type between the societies of the South and those of the North, and also between modern societies and traditional ones. The hypothesis is simple: all societies, in all periods, structurally produce individuals (in whatever way they are conceived and envisioned), and it is from this common process that the distinct historical paths of individuation must differentiate themselves. In this context, the modern Western institutional individualism, and the larger role attributed to the subject in this version, is nothing but one of the variants, and in that respect historically late, of a universal and structural process of individuation.

To conclude, could you point out the main questions that influence contemporary French sociology? Is it in a crisis? Are there differences with respect to the Anglo-Saxon production?

Sociology is always in crisis, and it would be alarming if it was not in crisis today in France! Now seriously, I believe that French sociology faces today a set of challenges that have to do with the decline of the use of the French language in the academic world, with difficulties of professional insertion of young sociologists, with a certain identity tension around certain methods and concepts, and I would add a crisis specifically intellectual (many of the sociological debates are no longer interesting, not to the public at large, that was never certain, but shall we say to a wide public of readers who have, at any rate in the French context, to pay more attention to economy, to philosophy and to part of history).

With respect to the comparison with the Anglo-Saxon tradition, before I answer that let me remind you of the disproportion of what is being compared here. On the one hand, if you take only the United States of America (to which one would, of course, have to add other English-speaking countries), we are talking about an academic world of around 4000 universities. In the French case there are only 85 public universities. To that, one would have to add, of course, among other things, important budgetary differences, differences in

structure, libraries, support to publication and, undoubtedly, the existence of an ever-expanding worldwide public capable of reading in English.

But all that, in the end, and despite the importance that it has, does not seem to me to be essential for the future of French sociology. I say that with respect to the French sociology, although in fact what I say can also be said about other national situations (indeed, it seems to me that a latent conflict of the same kind is also visible in the current Brazilian sociology).

French sociology experiences a tension between two large trends. The first emphasizes the paper in scientific journals as the main vehicle of communication of results, with an increasing preference for the English language, and it concurs in the end with a cumulative ideal of knowledge in the social sciences that is represented in an intensive specialization in themes and problems, and into the repetition of research protocols. Although we cannot reduce this tendency to the *Anglo-Saxon model*, it seems to me that this is the dominant trend today in American academia, in which one privileges more and more the large collective research projects, the cumulative repetition of results, the theme overspecialization and sometimes – not always – a more clearly affirmed concern with the practical usefulness of knowledge. There are in France today active and decided sympathizers of this line, and not just among the younger.

The second trend intends to prolong what has been until today the specificity of the French sociological tradition (we might say European): a discipline based on authors, which privileges the book and its writing in vernacular languages (French), which characterize the sociological knowledge of both the essayistic and of the scientific traditions, and which conserves the vocation of dealing with overall representations of the social life. To avoid caricature: there are in the United States departments and authors that also defend this intellectual tradition.

I believe that one of the main difficulties of French sociology today is that it finds itself

between these two streams. In fact, it finds itself amidst a conflict between two orientations, both intellectual and institutional. Indeed, beyond the randomness that is the existence of *good or bad* generations, the important thing is to understand the link that the generations (and types of sociology they develop) have with their conditions of production. In the French case, and in much of the European, in general one has privileged an institutional model of production based on *authors*, as the old university chairs testify, but also the old laboratories working in programs strongly identified with a director. Without having disappeared, this formerly hegemonic, and sometimes exclusive, bent tends to be displaced by the other line. I believe that an important part of the future of French sociology, and above all of its future identity, is at stake in this conflict. Personally, I do not believe that French sociology can succeed in the category of blockbusters, but I believe that there must be, as in the case of European audiovisual production, space for an author-based cinema/sociology. I don't have to tell you where my preferences as an intellectual worker lie!

To conclude, following the argument of your book *Forgé par l'épreuve*, could you make some considerations about the challenge of schooling in the process of individuation nowadays? How could the notions of inequality and difference be productive in the interpretation of this process?

The school trial is, undoubtedly, an important element of the current process of individuation, but it has not always been the case. This example allows us to distinguish between a sociology of life cycles and a sociology of individuation through trials: if almost everybody goes to school everywhere, this experience is not always a significant trial in a process of individuation. In the case of the French society, as we have seen with François Dubet, the school was not a major trial in the process of individuation until

the end of 1950s, since schooling was an experience relatively brief for many French people and, above all, because the process of social selection and reproduction happened independently of it. Nowadays, on the contrary, the school is a central trial in this reality. On the one hand, because the years of study do not cease to be increased (it is estimated that the younger generations that enter today the French education system will study on average between 18 and 20 years). On the other hand, because its meaning in terms of social trajectory and destiny is decisive, due to the fact that the assignment of a social position is largely made during schooling. In the Chilean case, as we studied with Kathya Araujo, the school has an incidence more and more important in the process of individuation, but it does so essentially in the form of a wider trial that we have characterized as the trial of merit. The centrality of school in Chilean society today reflects not only the appearance of new strategies of family reproduction and of social mobility, but also it is inscribed in the imaginary of a society which, due to the double neoliberal and democratizing revolution, has turned merit into its main horizon of justice. In the achievement of merit a tension is therefore established between the legitimate “door”– the school – and the “shortcut”–of resorting to social networks and personal contacts.

As far as inequality and difference are concerned, allow me to introduce a third term: the singularity. The challenges faced by school are not the same. The first two are inscribed within the context of the imaginary of equality. Inequalities demonstrate the limits of equality, and imply in corrective policies in the name of the egalitarian ideal. Ultimately, the situation is similar within the context of difference: the objective is a still equality, but we think that in order to achieve it the education system must treat differently the individuals (for socioeconomic or sociocultural reasons, for their handicaps...). Singularity opens up a distinct universe and constitutes therefore a much more consequential challenge. The realization of singularity introduces incommensurable evaluation criteria, it releases the objective from any logic of comparison or competence, and assumes that institutions are capable not only of having in mind the differences between the individuals with the objective of achieving equality, but also that institutions treat individuals in a personalized way, and sometimes as a function of singular and distinct objectives. Without forsaking the discussions about inequality and differences, I believe that in the years to come the debate about school justice will be progressively marked by the seal of singularity.

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